United Nations A/67/935

General Assembly

Distr.: General
16 July 2013

Original: English

Sixty-seventh session
Agenda item 20
Sustainable development

Letter dated 12 July 2013 from the Permanent Representative of Uzbekistan to the United Nations addressed to the Secretary-General

UZ 113/13

I have the honour to convey to you the letter from Mr. Islam Karimov, President of the Republic of Uzbekistan, with information on the programme of measures on eliminating the consequences of the drying up of the Aral Sea and averting the catastrophe of the ecological systems in the Aral Sea region (see annex).

I would appreciate if you could circulate the present letter and its annex as a document of the General Assembly under agenda item 20.

(*Signed*) Dilyor **Khakimov**
Permanent Representative of the Republic of Uzbekistan

13-39698 (E) 310713 310713

Please recycle

Annex to the letter dated 12 July 2013 from the Permanent Representative of Uzbekistan to the United Nations addressed to the Secretary-General

I am addressing you as the Chairman of the International Fund for saving the Aral Sea, which was established by the States of Central Asia in 1993 as a coordinating centre for the implementation of the joint programmes to save the Aral Sea and for the ecological recovery of the Aral Sea region.

Your travel to the Aral Sea region on 4-5 April 2010, along with your visit to the cities of Muynak and Nukus and your flyover of the ecological disaster zone has not only drawn the attention of the world community to the Aral catastrophe, but has also given a new impetus to the cooperation of the countries of the region and the United Nations on overcoming the serious consequences of this tragedy. Your immediate conversation with residents of this region served as an enormous moral support to them and left a deep impression in their hearts. Your visit has also inspired us with confidence that the countries of the region will not be left alone face to face in the struggle against this truly global catastrophe — the drying up of the Aral Sea.

In Uzbekistan we fully share your fair assessment of the scale and consequences of this crisis, the solution to which requires the efforts of the entire international community. As you have rightly pointed out, the "perishing of the Aral Sea is one of the most acute ecological calamities in the world. Addressing its consequences stands as a common responsibility of the entire world, not only of the countries of Central Asia".

Unfortunately, at present the situation in the Aral disaster zone continues to deteriorate, despite the measures taken by the countries of Central Asia and the international community in tackling this problem. The ecological, socioeconomic and humanitarian crisis in the Aral Sea region may become irreversible, with numerous related negative consequences for global ecological security.

Taking this unfolding situation into consideration, may I request you, Mr. Secretary-General, to disseminate the attached "Programme of measures on eliminating the consequences of the drying up of the Aral Sea and averting the catastrophe of the ecological systems in the Aral Sea region" (see enclosure) as a document of the sixty-eighth session of the General Assembly. The document was drafted on the basis of critical assessment of the unfolding disastrous situation in this region.

I would like to specifically underscore that the document is consonant and goes in harmony with the priorities of the United Nations Millennium Development Goals, securing ecological sustainability, improving the protection of motherhood and childhood, combating diseases and creating safe conditions for human life. It is not a secret that securing sustainable development, addressing climate change and the consequences of ecological disasters shall remain the key issues of the United Nations agenda for a long-term perspective.

(*Signed*) Islam **Karimov**
President of the Republic of Uzbekistan
Chairman of the International Fund for Saving the Aral Sea

Tashkent
10 July 2013

Enclosure

[Original: Russian]

Programme of measures on eliminating the consequences of the drying up of the Aral Sea and averting the catastrophe of the ecological systems in the Aral Sea region

In the modern world, humanity is facing ecological problems of unprecedented scale and destructive capacity which threaten the very existence of all living beings on the planet. It is no coincidence that the environment and climate change appear on the agendas of prominent international and regional organizations, institutes, forums and summits. The United Nations has designated achieving environmental sustainability as one of Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). The Rio+20 Conference placed environmental protection and combating the negative impacts of climate change on the United Nations sustainable development agenda beyond 2015.

One of the gravest global environmental disasters of modern times is the tragedy of the Aral Sea, experienced by the countries of Central Asia and their population of 60 million. Its environmental, climatic, socioeconomic and humanitarian consequences make it a direct threat to sustainable development in the region, and to the health, gene pool and future of people living there. The Aral Sea region crisis directly affects Turkmenistan, Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, and indirectly affects Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan.

Since the 1990s, the States of Central Asia have been doing their utmost to overcome the consequences of this environmental disaster, but their resources and physical capacity are insufficient, and the assistance provided by donors remains limited and inadequate address fully the problems of the Aral Sea area. As the borders of the area affected by the environmental crisis continue to expand, the scale of that crisis will become ever more disastrous, with far-reaching consequences not only for countries in the region but also far beyond its borders, unless the international community provides additional assistance to find a solution.

The Aral Sea catastrophe provides convincing proof of the interaction between the environment and strategic safety. For that precise reason, the countries in the region affected by the catastrophe are increasingly drawing the attention of the international community to the fact that the destruction of the Aral Sea will have damaging effects not just on the immediate area, but on the entire world.

The countries and the population of the Aral Sea region welcome the commitment of the United Nations, and of its Secretary-General, Ban Ki-moon, to addressing global environmental problems, including the Aral disaster. Clear proof of this was provided by the Secretary-General's visit to the Aral Sea region on 4 and 5 April 2010, which confirmed the global consequences of the Aral Sea crisis and the need to mobilize the efforts of the international community to resolve it. Following his visit, the Secretary-General described the destruction of the Aral Sea as "one of the worst environmental disasters of the world" and stated that its resolution was a "collective responsibility, not only for the nations of Central Asia but the whole world".

Until 1960 the Aral Sea was one of the largest closed bodies of water in the world, 426 km long, 284 km wide, with an area of 68,900 km^2, a volume of water of 1,083 km^3, and a maximum depth of 68 m.

The Aral Sea region had a large variety of flora and fauna, its waters contained 38 species of fish and a range of rare animals, it was the habitat of one million saiga antelopes, and its flora included 638 species of higher plants.

The Aral Sea played a vital role in the development of the regional economy, its output, sources of employment and sustainable social infrastructure. In the past the Aral Sea was among the richest sources of fishing in the world: the annual volume of fish caught in the waters of the Aral Sea region was 30,000 to 35,000 tonnes. More than 80 per cent of the inhabitants of the Aral Sea shore were employed in catching, processing and transporting fish and fish products. The fertile lands of the Amudarya and Syrdarya deltas, and also the rich pastures, provided employment for more than 100,000 people in livestock rearing, poultry breeding and the growing of agricultural crops.

The Aral Sea also served as a climate-regulating body of water and mitigated the sharp fluctuations in the weather throughout the region, exerting a positive influence on the living conditions of the population, agriculture and the environment. In winter, arriving air masses heated up over the waters of the Aral Sea. In summer, they cooled down over the same waters.

The problems of the Aral Sea arose and expanded into a threat in the 1960s, as a result of the feckless regulation of the major cross-border rivers in the region — the Syrdarya and Amudarya, which had previously fed an annual total of around 56 km^3 of water into the Aral Sea. The significant growth in the area's population, the scale of urbanization and absorption of land, and the past construction of major hydrotechnical and irrigation facilities on the water courses of the Aral Sea basin, without regard for environmental consequences, led to the drying-up of one of the most beautiful bodies of water on the planet. Within a single generation, a whole sea has virtually perished, the process of environmental degradation continues and the Aral Sea region is becoming a lifeless wasteland.

Over the past 50 years, the total outflow from rivers into the Aral Sea has fallen almost 4.5 times, to an average of 12.7 km^3. The water surface of the sea has been reduced by eight times and the volume of the water has decreased more than 13 times. The water level, which until 1960 had reached a maximum of 53.4 metres, has fallen to 29 metres. Salinity has increased 13 to 25 times and is now 7 to 11 times higher than the average mineralization of the world's oceans.

The sand-salt Aralkum desert, with a surface area of more than 5.5 million hectares, now covers the dried-up portion of the sea which was once home to rich flora and fauna and served as the natural climatic regulator of the adjacent areas. Constant ecological risk, with its negative impact on the quality of life, health and, most importantly, the population's gene pool, now affects not only the areas around the Aral Sea, but the whole region of Central Asia.

More than 75 million tonnes of dust and toxic salts enter the atmosphere annually from the Aral Sea. The dust plumes which rise from the bottom are more than 400 km in length and 40 km wide. According to scientists' estimates, the dust from the Aral Sea is already embedded in the glaciers of the Pamir Mountains and the Tian Shan, as well as the Arctic.

The Aral Sea region is the birthplace of a complex series of ecological-climatic, socioeconomic and demographic problems with far-reaching, threatening global consequences.

Since the beginning of the 1960s, the number of days on which the temperature has exceeded 40°C has doubled, and temperatures of 49°C in the shade have been recorded in places.

Water pollution and the large salt and dust discharge from the bottom of the dried-up sea have contributed to the growth among the population of the Aral Sea region of a number of somatic diseases such as anaemia, diseases of the kidneys, blood, digestive system, respiratory organs and cardiovascular system, gallstones and other diseases. Children are particularly vulnerable to the effects of a dangerous environment. The dioxin level in the blood of pregnant women and milk of breastfeeding mothers in Karakalpakstan is five times higher than in Europe.

The decline of the Aral Sea's transport role, fishing, animal husbandry and other types of economic activity, the shrinking of grazing land and reduced soil productivity, have deprived tens of thousands of people of their traditional livelihoods.

More than half of the plant and animal gene pool of the Aral Sea region has disappeared, causing 11 species of fish, 12 species of mammals, 26 types of birds and 11 species of plants to all but vanish.

The death of the Aral Sea has led to a long list of consequences, including water shortages, lower quality drinking water, soil pollution and degradation, a sharp reduction in biodiversity, the worsening of the health and gene pool of the population, climate change caused by a denser atmosphere and, possibly, a consequent shrinkage of glaciers in the Pamirs and Tian Shan, the main source of the region's main rivers.

Since the 1990s, all the countries suffering the destructive consequences of the Aral catastrophe have spoken out regularly at the United Nations and in other international and regional organizations to alert the international community to the problems of the Aral Sea and their close connection with regional and global security. As far back as 28 September 1993, during the forty-eighth session of the United Nations General Assembly, and 24 October 1995, during the fiftieth session, representatives of the countries of Central Asia appealed to the international community to provide assistance in saving the Aral Sea and the surrounding region, and warned that this problem was impossible to resolve without the support and assistance of international financial institutions and developed countries, and the organizational role of the United Nations.

On 8 September 2000, at the United Nations Millennium Summit in New York, the President of the Republic of Uzbekistan, Islam Karimov, proposed the creation of a council on the problems of the Aral Sea and surrounding region, under the auspices of the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), in the interests of promoting international cooperation in environmental protection.

The countries in the region now have every reason to be grateful for the significant assistance provided by the United Nations, international bodies and donor countries in mitigating the consequences of the Aral Sea crisis.

Data from the survey conducted by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and the International Fund for Saving the Aral Sea (IFAS) on donor assistance in the Aral Sea basin for the period 1995 to 2012, show the overall volume of international donor assistance for the whole Aral Sea region to have been around US$ 1,145 million.

The main outcome of the Secretary-General's 2010 visit to the Aral Sea region was the decision to launch the Joint United Nations 2012-2015 programme entitled "Sustaining Livelihoods Affected by the Aral Sea Disaster", which calls for the unification of the efforts of UNDP, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), World Health Organization (WHO), United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), and the United Nations Volunteers (UNV) in the Aral Sea region. The overall budget of the programme, financed from the United Nations Trust Fund for Human Security, is around US$ 4 million. The programme is designed to enhance the well-being of the most vulnerable segments of the population, provide support to improve access to basic social infrastructure, contribute to the creation of new sources of income, support entrepreneurship among women and young people, and improve health care.

This provides clear evidence of support for the population of the Aral Sea region from the international community.

Enormous efforts are being devoted to practical counter-measures at the national level, a key example being the creation of IFAS by Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan in January 1993.

The fundamental tasks established for IFAS were to preserve the biological heritage of the Aral Sea region, and to reduce the destructive impact of the ecological crisis on the environment and, most importantly, on the livelihood of the inhabitants of the region.

In December 2008, IFAS received observer status in the General Assembly.

The efforts of IFAS have borne fruit in the form of the two programmes conducted between 1995 and 2010 to assist the countries of the Aral Sea basin (ASBP-1, ASBP-2).

Mostly using their own national resources, the countries of Central Asia have made significant efforts as part of these programmes to develop mechanisms for the joint management of Aral Sea basin water resources; rehabilitate the areas affected by the ecological disaster; supply fresh drinking water; improve health, and reduce poverty and unemployment. The overall contribution of the IFAS member countries to the implementation of the ASBP-2 projects for 2003-2010 was more than US$ 2 billion. Donor assistance in implementing the programme projects was more than 1 per cent of this amount.

Implementation of the third programme, ASBP-3, devised for the period 2011 to 2015 by the IFAS Executive Committee in cooperation with United Nations system organizations, the World Bank, Asian Development Bank and European Union, as well as the Governments of a number of donor countries, is under way, with more than 300 projects potentially receiving funding of over US$ 8.5 billion.

The plan of action adopted in the wake of the International Conference on the Aral Sea Crisis, and its impact on the gene pool, flora and fauna of the southern Aral Sea region, and international cooperation for mitigating consequences, held with the

support of the United Nations on 10 and 11 March 2008 in Tashkent, provided input for the ASBP-3 programme.

The plan of action provides for the implementation of projects in nine areas: water supply and the development of communal facilities; improving land reclamation, health-care services, education and science; job creation; equality in tendering; developing transport infrastructure; combating desertification; environmental protection and alternative energy, a total of more than 100 projects valued at about US$ 1.5 billion.

During this period, all of these problems have remained at the centre of the attention of the IFAS member States, and implementation of projects in the areas indicated has relied on resources from national budgets and also from the United Nations, international foundations and donor countries.

The most significant measures have focused on resolving water shortages and desertification; reducing water consumption; countering the salination and degradation of land under cultivation; improving the population's access to drinking water; and establishing the infrastructure needed to treat diseases caused by changes in the environment and climate in the region.

Loans from the World Bank, the Asian Development Bank, the Islamic Development Bank and other financial institutions have played a major role in the implementation of the projects focused on these goals and on the restoration and modernization of the irrigation and drainage network.

For Uzbekistan alone, over US$ 1.2 billion has been invested in these efforts over the past 10 years.

Uzbekistan has been able to cut nationwide water use by 21 per cent, to 51 billion m^3 per year from 64 billion m^3 in the 1980s. Per capita water consumption has decreased from 3,000 m^3 to 1,700 m^3 per year.

A solid base of rules and legislation to protect nature has been established in recent years.

The Ecological Movement of Uzbekistan, established in 2008, has a permanent standing membership in the legislative chamber of the lower house of Parliament (Oliy Majlis), in order to strengthen law-making activities in the fields of the environment and countering the consequences of the Aral Sea crisis.

Around US$ 75 million in World Bank loans has been devoted to improving land reclamation and removal of harmful water runoff in southern Karakalpakstan.

In 2011, the 68,700-hectare Lower Amudarya State Biosphere Reserve was created for the purpose of preserving and restoring the land, flora and fauna, and stimulating economic and human development.

The implementation of the first round of the project entitled "Creation of local bodies of water in the Amudarya delta" helped to bring into operation five water drainage facilities, establish 45 km of shore protection dams, and create water-regulation reservoirs with a water mirror surface area of 70,000 hectares and an overall volume of 810 million m^3. Over the past 15 years, 180,000 hectares of the Amudarya river delta have been irrigated, and local lakes created; there are plans to expand their water mirror up to 230,000 hectares.

In the area affected by the Aral Sea crisis, 740,000 hectares of forest have been planted, including 310,000 hectares on the dried-up seabed; there are plans to plant on a further 200,000 hectares of dried-up seabed over the next few years. In Karakalpakstan over the last 15 years, about 1,700 km of local drainage networks have been brought into operation, the provision of drinking water to the population has increased almost fourfold, and more than 100 rural medical polyclinics, a majority of maternity hospitals and a national oncology centre have been built, reconstructed and supplied with medical equipment. Between 1997 and 2012, modern outpatient polyclinics with a capacity of 32,600 visits per shift were brought into operation in the Republic of Karakalpakstan and the Khorezm, Bukhara and Navoiy regions. Hospitals were built and reconstructed, providing a capacity of 5,800 beds; and 840 rural medical centres are in operation. As a result, in comparison with 1997, the number of congenital abnormalities in the Republic of Karakalpakstan was reduced 3.1 times, maternal mortality halved and infant mortality decreased 2.4 times.

A US$ 1.3 billion plan to finance projects and measures in the Aral Sea region has been approved for 2013, providing for the creation of small local bodies of water in the Amudarya delta, construction of water intake facilities with desalination installations, the creation of protective forest plantations and ornithological monitoring of bodies of water in the southern part of the region.

However, the continuous worsening of the environmental, socioeconomic and humanitarian effects of the drying-up of the Aral Sea and the deterioration of the conditions of human habitation in the region make it obvious that, without substantive assistance from the United Nations and the international community, it is impossible to resolve what is by definition a problem that affects the whole planet.

In contemplating further ways to address the situation in the region, we have come to realize that restoring the Sea to its previous boundaries is impossible. This process has already advanced so far that it cannot be reversed. The actual process of resolving the related problems is a very difficult one. The primary need is to rescue the people who live around the dying sea and to stabilize the ecosystem of the region.

Acknowledging the humanitarian dimension of the work of the United Nations, and the fact that human security is the most important element of its activities in the modern age, the countries directly bordering the Aral Sea region wish to call for a more concrete reflection of that dimension, through a solution to the Aral Sea crisis.

In this connection, we are now referring not to saving the Aral Sea itself, but to halting irreversible changes in the lives of the people living in the region. The task is not to save the water, but to resolve the problem of rehabilitating the Aral Sea region, preserve the health and gene pool of the population, restore and protect the ecosystems, and create all the necessary conditions for people to have a decent life.

With the negative situation becoming ever worse in the Aral Sea basin and the adjacent area, urgent additional measures are needed to counter the catastrophic consequences of the drying-up of the Sea, and create the requisite socioenvironmental and humanitarian conditions for the 60 million people living there and in the immediate vicinity.

The scale of the tasks ahead requires more effective coordination of efforts and the combining of resources at the national, regional and international levels in order to prevent even greater disaster in the area.

In this connection, we are calling for the adoption as an official document of the sixty-eighth session of the General Assembly of the Programme of measures on eliminating the consequences of the drying up of the Aral Sea and averting the catastrophe of the ecological systems in the Aral Sea region, including the implementation of the following fundamentally important stabilization measures:

I. Creation of conditions for life, reproduction and preservation of the gene pool in the Aral Sea region.

This relates primarily to providing the population with clean drinking water, the development of the social infrastructure and enhancing the quality of preventive and medical services, and creating the conditions for employment and growth in the income of the population.

Particular attention is to be devoted to the implementation of projects to protect the health of mothers and children, improve the facilities of rural medical institutions and supply those institutions with modern equipment.

II. Enhancement of water management and water-saving. Protecting natural bodies of water in the Aral Sea catchment area. This relates to the formation and development of available bodies of water in the Amudarya river delta, devising agreed mechanisms for management and protection of water resources in the Aral Sea basin, and introducing integrated management of water resources in the basins of the Amudarya and Syrdarya rivers.

The reconstruction of irrigation and drainage systems and the introduction of modern water-saving irrigation technologies are of paramount importance here.

III. Implementation of large-scale measures to plant forests on the dried-up bed of the Aral Sea and prevent desertification in the region.

Measures to prevent erosion, to stop and stabilize moving sands, and prevent harmful salt and sand particles from rising into the air.

IV. Preservation of biodiversity, restoration of biological resources and protection of flora and fauna.

Special attention will be devoted to the preservation and protection of disappearing flora and fauna, the creation of nurseries for preserving (restoring) their gene pool, expanding protected natural territories in the Aral Sea region, the introduction of a stable system of managing wetlands and preservation of pastures.

V. Further institutional reinforcement and strengthening cooperation between countries in the region, within the International Fund for Saving the Aral Sea, and activating efforts aimed at alerting the international community to the Aral Sea catastrophe.